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Intelligence and civilisation: Thomas Carlyle and Godfrey Thomson on the role of intelligence in governance and political involvement

Ian J. Deary

Centre for Cognitive Ageing and Cognitive Epidemiology, Department of Psychology,
University of Edinburgh, 7 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ

Email i.deary@ed.ac.uk

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Abstract

Thomas Carlyle (1795 to 1881) and Godfrey Thomson (1881 to 1955) were both interested in human intelligence differences and how they contributed to the governance of a society and people's political involvement. Thomson was Professor of Educational psychology at the University of Edinburgh from 1925 to 1951. He was associated with large devising and distribution of intelligence tests for educational selection, especially in England. Both men were born into humble backgrounds, and both achieved high status and esteem. Both were interested in: how intelligence might be tested; how to discover people with high intelligence; and whether intelligence was linked with moral qualities in individuals. The various and similar ways in which these writers associated intelligence with civilisation are discussed here.

“...it is necessary to ask about the dependence of civilisation on intelligence
and about the relative importance, to civilisation, of intelligence and other
qualities.”

(Thomson, 1937, from the Ludwig Mond lecture)

Countries don't run by themselves. The processes of governance and political involvement can be carried out more or less well. So, concerned and influential thinkers have applied their reasoning to how these might be done optimally. Psychological issues are central to their concerns. Specifically, the cognitive and moral qualities of those who contribute to the political system are often raised (Deary, Batty, & Gale, 2008a,b). But the lineaments of cognitive quality are not given. The political thinker who wishes to enumerate desirable qualities of contributors to a system of governance must first have some identified psychological qualities in mind. And when these have been decided upon, there are the problems of: finding people with these qualities; nurturing them where that is possible; and worrying about whether the system of governance has a way of identifying and employing such talent. This paper will illustrate and discuss how Thomas Carlyle addressed these issues in some of the Latter-Day Pamphlets. In parallel, it will discuss the contributions of Professor Sir Godfrey Thomson to these matters—especially in his Ludwig Mond Lecture of 1936 (Thomson, 1936, 1937; and see Deary, Lawn, Brett, & Bartholomew, 2009)—and compare them with those of Carlyle. Two themes emerge in Carlyle's and Thomson's thinking: the association between human cognitive and moral qualities; and the problems of searching for people with cognitive talents in a population.

It is not necessarily the case that people's backgrounds determine their intellectual interests, but it is at least interesting that Carlyle and Thomson have parallels in their backgrounds and later came to worry about similar matters concerning how civilisations can obtain the best people to contribute to their running. Thomas Carlyle's personal history is too well known to readers of this journal to require describing here. Godfrey Hilton Thomson (1881-1955) was born in the year that Carlyle died. He was born in Carlisle—not far from Carlyle's birthplace and childhood—but his family moved to Felling in Northumberland soon after his birth. Thomson's father was absent, and he was brought up by his mother and an aunt. His family was working class, and he was destined to become a pattern maker. He was identified at school as an intelligent boy, and became a pupil teacher. He took a first degree in the UK and then a PhD in physics at Strasbourg, then in German Alsace. He was on the staff of Armstrong College in Newcastle—part of the University of Durham—until 1925, rising to Professor of Education. He moved to Edinburgh in 1925, to the Bell Chair in Education and the Directorship of the Moray House [Teacher] Training College—and stayed there until his retirement in 1951. His research work and public lectures concentrated on the study of human intelligence differences. He worked on the theory and statistical analysis of human intelligence differences. He was the originator of the hugely successful Moray House Test series of mental tests that were used in the decisions about transfer from primary to secondary school in England (a detailed account of his intelligence testing industry is given in Chapter 7 of Sutherland, 1984). In a post-retirement speech to educational researchers, Thomson (1953, p. 11) stated that he had three passions in his professional life: mathematics, educational research and,

“the feeling that I had a moral duty to do everything possible to improve methods of discovering intelligent children who might be overlooked, and guiding them into forms of higher education likely both to make them happier in their lot, and useful to a society and civilisation which needs them.”

This short quotation raises four key points about Thomson’s thinking. The first is, that, because the identification of his being intelligent, though poor, he had a moral duty to help others in the same situation. He mentions this explicitly in his autobiographical writings (Thomson, 1952, 1969). The second is the pervading importance of intelligence as a human quality. The third is that intelligence must be developed through education. The fourth is that such nurturing benefits the society in which the individual lives.

Summarising Carlyle’s and Thomson’s backgrounds and interests, then, finds them being raised close-by geographically, originating from humble backgrounds, being highly socially mobile because of their intelligence and drive, and spending their mature professional years thinking about how to maximise the intelligence being applied to optimising the function of nations.

A difference between Thomson and Carlyle is that Thomson began his professional life after the invention of mental (or intelligence, or IQ, or cognitive) tests. He developed this technology himself, and contributed to the theory of mental functioning on which it was based. Therefore, his interest in intelligence’s place in civilisation was an application of this technology: he was developing tools for the personal and greater good. Carlyle’s writings, on the other hand, occur long before intelligence tests were invented, and so he is faced with identifying the mental qualities that he discusses without Thomson’s ready-to-hand tools (Thomson, 1940). However, there were civilisations that had developed technologies to select people for their executive, at least. For over 1000 years, China had a

massive system of local and national examinations that were the routes to civil office (Miyazaki, 1981). Their content was based on classical Chinese culture, literature and philosophy. Coincidentally, the last examinations occurred in 1905 (Elman, 2000), the year in which the first intelligence test was invented, in France.

Although Thomson and Carlyle both thought intelligence was an important quality of people who would contribute to the running of a nation, the similarities between the two should not be overstated. Thomson was a democrat, and Carlyle was far from that in his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*. Thomson's clearest statement of how he saw intelligence linked to the operating of a civilisation was his Ludwig Mond Lecture to the University of Manchester in 1936 (Thomson, 1936, 1937). This has been reprinted with an extensive commentary and reference list (Deary et al., 2009), and only the relevant summary points will be made in this paper for the purposes of comparing it with Carlyle's writings. The Mond Lecture is unusual for Thomson. Beyond his typical lectures on mental testing in education, he was using the topic of mental testing in education to address the preservation of civilisation against the rise of fascism in Germany. Similarly, there is no doubt that Carlyle viewed high intelligence as civilisation-preserving. In *Downing Street* he writes that,

“And know always, and even lay to heart with a quite unusual solemnity, with a seriousness altogether of a religious nature, that as "Human Stupidity" is verily the accursed parent of all this mischief, so Human Intelligence alone, to which and to which only is victory and blessedness appointed here below, will or can cure it. If we knew this as devoutly as we ought to do, the evil, and all other evils were curable;-- alas, if we had from of old known this, as all men made in God's image ought to do,

the evil never would have been! Perhaps few Nations have ever known it less than we, for a good while back, have done. Hence these sorrows.”

From Thomson’s Mond Lecture and from, especially, Carlyle’s Downing Street and New Downing Street Latter Day Pamphlets, there emerge two further remarkably similar themes. The first is that both thought there was an association between high intellectual and moral qualities. The second is that both devoted much thought to the method of identifying those with high intelligence.

A link between cognitive and moral qualities

In Model Prisons, Carlyle writes, “Stupidity intellectual and stupidity moral (for the one always means the other, as you will, with surprise or not, discover if you look)”. And, In Downing Street, Carlyle writes,

“That a man of Intellect, of real and not sham Intellect, is by the nature of him likewise inevitably a man of nobleness, a man of courage, rectitude, pious strength... Human Intellect, if you consider it well, is the exact summary of Human *Worth*; and the essence of all worth-ships and worships is reverence for that same.”

It is unusual to find this in psychology, but Thomson agreed with Carlyle that positive intellectual and moral qualities tend to go together. In his Mond Lecture, Thomson stated that, “the tendency is for a correlation of intellect with good character.” He admitted exceptions to this general rule but, in general, “self-control and tolerance which, in the main, go with intellect, good points of character.” Unlike Carlyle, Thomson did not necessarily view intellect and moral qualities as linked by nature. Rather, there is the mediating force of education,

“Intellect is, in the main, necessary to character, or at least is its accompaniment.... The intelligence must of course be fed with a good education. I do not mean an education of the character, which invariably means indoctrination with some code or other, but a good intellectual education. The Soul is to be *turned* from the world of becoming to that of being by a true art of education.”

Beyond *how* cognitive and moral qualities are linked, there is the question of whether they are. For example, a modern writer has identified higher intelligence and higher levels of the personality trait of conscientiousness as the key predictors of more successful people and nations (Lynn, 1996). Yet, Lynn is discussing qualities that are statistically independent. For him, it is the co-occurrence of these uncorrelated traits that is needed for a successful civilisation. However, other research does find that children with higher intelligence have, as adults, more tolerant social attitudes (Deary et al., 2008a).

In addition to his ideas about intelligence and moral qualities, Carlyle’s writings on psychological qualities have another modern relevance. There has long been debate—some of it very technical—in psychology about the number of different types of intelligence that exist. Among the types of intelligence mentioned by Carlyle in the Latter-Day Pamphlets there are, “natural wisdom,” “really human,” “red-tapish,” “owlish and pedantical,” “beaver,” “vulpine,” “sham,” “real.” And there are others. The likelihood is that, for many of these, they are actually the occurrence of intelligence in people with different personality traits that are not correlated with intelligence. They are probably intelligence seen through the lens of various personality traits.

Carlyle sought a special kind of intellect for political leadership, one that was combined with high moral development. There were others, not to be denigrated, but not fit for high office. In New Downing Street he writes,

“the intellect of the Nineteenth Century, so full of miracle to Heavyside and others, is itself a mechanical or *beaver* intellect rather than a high or eminently human one. A dim and mean though authentic kind of intellect, this; venerable only in defect of better. This kind will avail but little in the higher enterprises of human intellect, especially in that highest enterprise of guiding men Heavenward, which, after all, is the one real “governing” of them on this God's-Earth:--an enterprise not to be achieved by beaver intellect, but by other higher and highest kinds.”

Further, he writes,

“If Governments neglect to invite what noble intellect there is, then too surely all intellect, not omnipotent to resist bad influences, will tend to become beaverish ignoble intellect; and quitting high aims, which seem shut up from it, will help itself forward in the way of making money and such like; or will even sink to be sham intellect, helping itself by methods which are not only beaverish but vulpine, and so “ignoble” as not to have common honesty.”

This reiterates Carlyle's search, among those to be political leaders, of either a type of intelligence that is imbued with nobility, or the co-occurrence of high intelligence with certain traits of personality. Again, from recent research (Deary et al., 2008a) there is a tendency for high intelligence to be found alongside general tolerance and an ability to see past prejudice, but this is not necessarily, or at all, what Carlyle would have had in mind with respect to aspects of character. Today, the psychological quality often cited as an aspect of character that partners cognitive capability in successful leaders is emotional intelligence, and it has even been applied to Abraham Lincoln's leadership style

(Anonymous, 2009). It has also been shown that there is heterogeneity in the non-cognitive qualities that people look for in their political leaders, depending on their own political orientation (Roets & Van Hiel, 2009). Also, of some more concern—and bearing in mind Carlyle’s preferred leaders and their styles—it has been found that dominant people attain more influence and appear more competent than their cognitive skills would more objectively indicate (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009).

The riddle (Carlyle) and the sieve (Thomson): finding the right people to govern

Carlyle devoted much space, and Thomson devoted much of his working life, to thinking about how to find people with special intellect, so that they could make a contribution to civilization. They were advocating—in Thomson’s case actually practising—the same sort of nationwide screening for the brightest individuals. They were not aiming towards the same end. For Carlyle, the aim was a meritocratic search for those special intellects who would govern, but not democratically. For Thomson, the aim was more complex, a combination of matching education to people’s intellect, and of an ideal that an educated society was a better one. Here is Carlyle writing in Downing Street,

“To sift and riddle the Nation, so that you might extricate and sift out the true ten gold grains, or ablest men, and of these make your Governors or Public Officers; leaving the dross and common sandy or silty material safely aside, as the thing to be governed, not to govern; certainly all ballot-boxes, caucuses, Kennington-Common meetings, Parliamentary debates, Red Republics, Russian Despotisms, and constitutional or unconstitutional methods of society among mankind, are intended to achieve this one end; and some of them, it will be owned, achieve it very ill!”

Carlyle thus stated the job: to find the best intellects to run the country. He follows this by thinking through the practicalities. Someone or some group must be the individuals with

the task of selecting the gifted people who will become the governors. They will require a method of selection, bearing in mind that what they are looking for is the brightest intellects. And they will have to decide whom should be tested. From Carlyle, the answers to the first two of these practical issues are unsatisfactory, and the answer to the third is perhaps surprising.

Who should sift and riddle the nation to find the best intellects? Carlyle writes in Downing Street, as follows.

“Who is there that can recognize real intellect, and do reverence to it; and discriminate it well from sham intellect, which is so much more abundant, and deserves the reverse of reverence? He that himself has it!--One really human Intellect, invested with command, and charged to reform Downing Street for us, would continually attract real intellect to those regions, and with a divine magnetism search it out from the modest corners where it lies hid. And every new accession of intellect to Downing Street would bring to it benefit only, and would increase such divine attraction in it, the parent of all benefit there and elsewhere!”

To those who are familiar with Carlyle’s fondness for strong, charismatic leaders and his biographies of Cromwell and Frederick the Great, this will not be surprising. But the answer begs the question of the method to be used to find such a person in the first place.

Carlyle then turns to the question of how others shall be tested for their ability to govern. In Downing Street he asks about the possible method of such testing.

““What method, then; by what method?” ask many. Method, alas! To secure an increased supply of Human Intellect to Downing Street, there will evidently be no quite effectual "method" but that of increasing the supply of Human Intellect,

otherwise definable as Human Worth, in Society generally; increasing the supply of sacred reverence for it, of loyalty to it, and of life-and-death desire and pursuit of it, among all classes,--if we but knew such a "method"! Alas, that were simply the method of making all classes Servants of Heaven; and except it be devout prayer to Heaven, I have never heard of any method!"

It was mentioned above that the Chinese had had in place a system of sifting the nation for its civil service. It was based on intellect, and had been running for many hundreds of years. Perhaps Carlyle had not heard of it, or would not have considered it suitable to find the particular type of intellect he thought was appropriate for governing. Therefore, for two of Carlyle's issues we have had unsatisfactory answers, almost despair on his part. He has strong opinions that a key leader is needed in order to attract and seek others, but it is not clear how such a person will emerge; and he declares himself ignorant of any method by which people can be tested for their relevant abilities.

Thomson and Carlyle might have had different ideas about the people who would be allowed to participate in society's decision making. We have no evidence to indicate that Thomson was other than a democrat as well as being a meritocrat. However, they agree that the search for intellectual talent is an important task for society. Thomson was closely associated with the use of mental ability tests for this purpose. Thomson was realistic. He might have been involved in the production and distribution of such tests on a huge scale (Sutherland, 1984), but he was critical about their powers.

"I have had for thirty years a very wide experience of making, using, and following up the results of group tests. Few can be more fully aware of their dangers and pitfalls than I am. They are, of course, like all human instruments, far from infallible: but they are less fallible than most other methods of estimating human

ability—at any rate, at estimating ability in a comparatively short time, as is often necessary. We must not make the better the enemy of the good. It is a common error of judgment to say (as one can of most things) “this is not perfect”, and then to add “so away with it”. Of course group intelligence tests are not perfect. But in the absence of any better alternative at present, we must use the group tests and their correlations with the numerous social facts we have collected, while bearing in mind throughout the very many limitations to which these tests are subject.” (Scottish Council for Research in Education, 1949, pp. xiv–xv.)

When Carlyle turns to the question of where talent should be sought, the answer is clearly meritocratic, and in one sense democratic. He cares nothing for background; he simply wants the best talent for the country, wherever it is found. And here, as well as foresightedly separating intellect from social background, he shows some sophistication with regard to population statistics. That is, he realises that, the more people who are considered, the more likely one is to find high intellect. In Downing Street, he writes as follows.

“Consider how many Toms and Jacks there are to choose from, well or ill! The aristocratic class from whom Members of Parliament can be elected extends only to certain thousands; from these you are to choose your Secretary, if a seat in Parliament is the primary condition. But the general population is of Twenty-seven Millions... the whole British Nation, learned, unlearned, professional, practical, speculative and miscellaneous, is at your disposal! “In the lowest broad strata of the population, equally as in the highest and narrowest, are produced men of every kind of genius; man for man, your chance of genius is as good among the millions as among the units;--and class for class, what must it be! From all classes, not from

certain hundreds now but from several millions, whatsoever man the gods had gifted with intellect and nobleness, and power to help his country, could be chosen.”

It is worth emphasizing the following from the above quotation: “In the lowest broad strata of the population, equally as in the highest and narrowest, are produced men of every kind of genius...” That is an especially meritocratic—and modern-sounding—thought. Of course, it could reflect knowledge based on his personal background, given his own social mobility. Both he and Thomson rose to high social status from humble backgrounds as a result of the sifting processes based on intelligence. And, like Thomson, Carlyle would have thought about what would have happened with his life had he not been elevated as a result of his mental capability. Certainly, Carlyle considered those of high ability whose eventual occupation did not fully reflect what they might have achieved for civilisation. In Downing Street he wrote as follows.

“From the lowest and broadest stratum of Society, where the births are by the million, there was born, almost in our own memory, a Robert Burns; son of one who “had not capital for his poor moor-farm of Twenty Pounds a year.” Robert Burns never had the smallest chance to get into Parliament, much as Robert Burns deserved, for all our sakes, to have been found there. For the man... was a born king of men: full of valor, of intelligence and heroic nobleness; fit for far other work than to break his heart among poor mean mortals, gauging beer!” “Song-writing,—the narrowest chink ever offered to a Thunder-god before!”

Carlyle, again in Downing Street presses home the thought that his proposal is a kind of democracy, even though it is not the democracy that others typically mean when they use the term.

“For the sake of my Democratic friends, one other observation. Is not this Proposal the very essence of whatever truth there is in "Democracy;" this, that the able man be chosen, in whatever rank he is found? That he be searched for as hidden treasure is; be trained, supervised, set to the work which he alone is fit for. All Democracy lies in this...”

“By what method or methods can the able men from every rank of life be gathered, as diamond-grains from the general mass of sand”

“to choose the fittest man, under penalties; to choose, not the fittest of the four or the three men that were in Parliament, but the fittest from the whole Twenty-seven Millions that he could hear of”

Carlyle presses home the validity of his democratic proposal by citing an example of an organization that follows his precepts: the Roman Catholic Church. This is an especially good example for him, given that the organization is old, strictly hierarchical and conservative.

“To promote men of talent, to search and sift the whole society in every class for men of talent, and joyfully promote them, has not always been found impossible. In many forms of polity they have done it, and still do it, to a certain degree. The degree to which they succeed in doing it marks, as I have said, with very great accuracy the degree of divine and human worth that is in them, the degree of success or real ultimate victory they can expect to have in this world.--Think, for example, of the old Catholic Church... No questions asked about your birth, genealogy, quantity of money-capital or the like; the one question was, "Is there some human nobleness in you, or is there not?" The poor neat-herd's son, if he were a Noble of Nature, might rise to Priesthood, to High-priesthood, to the top of this world...”

A century later, one can see Carlyle's sifting system in the UK: through mental testing for the purposes of different levels of secondary education. At the Carnegie-funded International Conference on Examinations in 1931, the English system was by then described as follows,

"If you want to see the educational process as it is conceived by the ordinary English administrator, choose an early train going through a rather thinly populated district in England and stopping at all the country stations. At each of the little country stations, round about eight o'clock, or half past eight in the morning, you will see about four or five pupils, perhaps two girls and three boys, and if the village is somewhat larger, it may be four girls and six or seven boys, waiting to be picked up by the train to go to a central secondary school. They have all been chosen by examinations—one hopes to heaven that the examinations do choose them with some actual success in getting the best of them. It is to them, by trying to discover every naturally superior mind, and not only give it its opportunity to force its way to the front but actually train it and bring it to the front, that the English administrator at this moment mainly trusts in his hopes for the future of our civilization." (Wallas, in Monroe, 1931).

Wallas's final sentence has much resonance with Carlyle's concerns: "trying to discover every naturally superior mind... for the future of our civilization".

Thomson wanted to apply this type of sieving for different reasons. Whereas Carlyle focused on finding an intellectual and moral elite to run the country, Thomson's aims were the common and individual good. The educational sieve was to be applied for the purpose of meritocratic selection, and the achievement of an educated society. In his Mond lecture

he stated that one of the aims of participating in the science of intelligence testing was, “a desire to give the individual poor boy a chance of getting on in the world” (Thomson, 1936, 1937). As was cited above, from another lecture given seventeen years later, Thomson (1953) said that he, “had a moral duty to do everything possible to improve methods of discovering intelligent children who might be overlooked, and guiding them into forms of higher education likely both to make them happier in their lot, and useful to a society and civilisation which needs them.”

Possibly, this is a place of clear divergence between Thomson and Carlyle, as it was between Thomson and some of his contemporaries. At the time—the UK in the 1920s and early 1936—when educational opportunities were expanding there was a concern that an over-educated population without the appropriate opportunities to use the education in occupations that required it could become disaffected. Thomson (1936, 1937) tackled this directly in his Mond Lecture, “how many educated intelligences does a modern community need? Now for my own part I reply to this without hesitation with the answer, as many as it can possibly get.” Thomson did not want to see a “split in the nation between the educated and the uneducated, which means, if not civil war, then a state of disguised warfare.” This is an almost identical concern to that of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) in their bestselling book *The Bell Curve*, in which they described a USA split on the basis of education and mental ability.

Despite Thomson’s huge professional commitment to the devising and distributing of mental tests for educational selection, he did not agree with the system which the testing supported, “I regret the forking of the ways in England, at the early age of 11 years, into elementary and secondary education, and why I prefer the American system of one High

School for all” (Thomson, 1936, 1937). And he continued by indicating that, although some mechanism of intellectual testing was needed to identify the correct level of education for each individual, that did not imply that people should be separated on this basis.

“I not only think that every sufficiently intelligent child is entitled to a higher education, but I think it would be in its own interest for the State to strain every nerve to see that he got it, and got it if possible in a way which would not create social differences based on intelligence, in the same school as his less intelligent comrade.”

Conclusion

Thomson’s Mond lecture ended with a homily on the importance of intelligence, of appreciating differences in people’s intelligence, and of educating them according to such differences.

“The only hope for unity, permanent unity, among mankind is through the rule of intelligence, through the cultivation, by an education proper to each, of the intelligence of all. The schoolmaster is right who considers that his sole business is to lead his pupils to see truth clearly, and who holds that this is in itself character training, character training, and the only character-training the school may lend itself to, if it is to refrain from serving party or class, colour or race, or prejudice of whatever kind, but is to serve civilisation and all mankind.”

For Thomson, like Carlyle before him, the stakes were high. Thomson was writing against a background of the rise of “irrationalism”—as he called it—in Europe. And he thought his work on intelligence had a place in fighting the forces of irrationalism. Thomson and Carlyle had, therefore, both enlisted the testing of intelligence and the identification of

people of high intelligence—from all social levels—into the front line in their plans to retain civilisation.

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